

Opening Statement by Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on International Relations
“Hurricane Reconstruction and Preparedness”
June 28, 2006

We are less than one month into the storm season and many people throughout our Hemisphere are watching weather reports, forecasts and storm-system tracking models to prepare for the inevitable. Destructive winds, torrential downpours, devastating floods, major disruptions of essential services, mudslides, and loss of life.

The images from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Stan, Dennis, Wilma and Ivan and other major storms are seared into our memory. No sooner have we begun to recover from the havoc wrought by these storms do we find ourselves facing another round of serious weather. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts 13 to 16 named storms this year and four to six hurricanes that could reach Category 3 strength or higher with winds in excess of 110 miles per hour.

This oversight hearing will look at the lessons learned from recent storm seasons, the delivery of emergency assistance and reconstruction of critical infrastructure in communities impacted, and the level of preparedness we have to plan, coordinate and mitigate problems.

Tropical storms and hurricanes caused major problems in 2004 and 2005. There were 28 named storms and 15 Hurricanes last year, claiming thousands of lives and causing massive problems in the Gulf States, Central America and in a number of Caribbean nations. Heavily dependant on tourism, many Caribbean nations were hurt by the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the subsequent U.S. economic recession and sluggish recovery. Haiti, Grenada, Jamaica, and the Bahamas, were hard hit by devastating hurricanes in 2004. In 2005, Hurricane Dennis heavily damaged Cuba and Grenada, which were still picking up the pieces from Hurricane Ivan in September 2004.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, nine of the 11 hurricane seasons since 1995 have been above normal. Intense storm systems can wipeout crops, cause shortages of food supplies, poison water supplies, cripple power grids, disrupt energy supplies and distribution networks, and cause fuel shortages. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita knocked out 28 percent of U.S. refining capacity due to forced evacuations of nearly 600 oil and gas production platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. This is a subject we have been focusing on for many months, with high oil and gas prices costing consumers more than ever. Hurricane Katrina focused our attention to the very real threat of disruptions in our domestic energy supply. Other Congressional Committees with jurisdiction have conducted oversight hearings into the Federal response to Katrina and lessons learned.

Under the jurisdiction of this Subcommittee, dealing with oversight of foreign assistance activities to the Latin America and Caribbean region, we want to know whether the emergency assistance we have provided has helped to rehabilitate critical transportation and communications infrastructure. Do we have the capacity to better monitor and provide advance warning to vulnerable populations that stand in the path of approaching storms? Can we provide strong response teams to multiple locations? Are we pre-positioning humanitarian supplies and emergency response equipment?

Last fall the House passed H.Con.Res.280, a resolution that I sponsored to urge expedited humanitarian relief, as well as stronger efforts to provide technical assistance to Central American governments in order to strengthen the capacity of first responders and governmental institutions at the national, provincial, and local levels. The legislation urges assistance which targets immediate and long-term infrastructure needs, with a special emphasis on improvements that aim to increase emergency preparedness and withstand future natural disasters.

Before I conclude my opening statement today, I want to emphasize the importance of drawing lessons from past emergency response and recovery operations. This subcommittee has convened many oversight hearings about illicit trafficking, transnational crime, and other threats to security in our hemisphere. When we turn to Q&A after our first panel, I plan to go into detail some of the findings in a GAO report released last month on Caribbean Disaster Recovery Activities. The GAO Report uncovered numerous problems and a failure to follow best practices anchored in lessons-learned from past operations leading to a pattern of hampered recovery efforts in Haiti, Grenada, Jamaica and several other Caribbean nations.

The Caribbean region, our Third Border, poses many challenges for U.S. policy in areas this Subcommittee has addressed like law enforcement, counter-terrorism, and counter-narcotics. In the context of our hearing today, clearly there are added budgetary pressures associated with humanitarian responses and in the reconstruction process. Federal agencies must be drawing lessons learned and instituting broader efforts to incorporate best practices in recovery and reconstruction programs. In the wake of natural disasters it is essential that we achieve effective cooperation with the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean to conduct assessments, deliver humanitarian and material assistance, coordinate technical assistance and logistical support.